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ABSTRACT

Although somewhat different from play, children's spontaneous activity can be seen as structured by a biologically given, adaptive, and natural learning system common to all human beings. Analysis of literature in which adults recall the play experiences of their early youth and careful analysis of young children's spontaneous activity reveal six consistent patterns of activity: children emerge as explorers, constructors, communicators, athletes, thespians, and creators of rituals. Through such activities as these, children learn much before entering educational or day care programs. Learning through spontaneous activity behaviors differs fundamentally from learning in school settings; contexts of spontaneous activity are open-ended and provide opportunities for further development, whereas curriculum-based learning is fixed and limited. Spontaneous activity skills can be used to supplement and complement school curriculum skills and activities at all age levels. Materials which best support young children's spontaneous activity are those which can be used "extensionally," or in many ways. The concluding discussion provides guides for identifying common characteristics of extensional materials as well as for using such materials, an example of spontaneous activity in the classroom, and a chart showing how particular spontaneous activities support learning in basic curriculum areas. (RH)

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AN ACTIVITY GUIDE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

by

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An Activity Guide for Early Childhood

A first glance at the title of this article might suggest that upon having read it, you will be able to add many more activities to a collection of activities appropriate for young children. Well, it's not that kind of article; then again it could be! I would like to explore young children's activity, not activities for young children, though the former should imply the latter. Part of what we need to do is to break with the ways in which people think about those things children do when there is no one around telling them what to do. Traditionally, this kind of activity is considered play, but I hesitate to use that label because its definition has evolved and changed over time and now means so many different things depending on whom you're talking to or what you are reading and the particular context referred to.

My preference is to refer to children's active involvement with the environment and the things in it as spontaneous activity. Spontaneous activity, like play, is active, apparently enjoyable, voluntary, self-initiated, often social and a natural product of the processes of physical, social and cognitive growth.

As a consequence of children's spontaneous activity, children acquire abilities and concepts on their own which are"part of their basic adaptive equipment, which they need to get along in the world as living creatures." (Elkind 1976) That must mean that children possess some system for processing information and learning about things which structures their spontaneous activity. Socio-biologists suggest that this learning system is built into the behavioral patterns of the human species. This implies that we cannot help but learn because the learning system, thought of as a set of behavioral skills, is canalized in our maturation.

If there is a universal learning system, and I believe there is, then children's spontaneous activity may be the universal activity system which structures, inspires, facilitates and complements the learning system. Substantiation for the fact that there is a universal activity system is found in Catherine Garvey's book entitled Play in which very early in the book she cites "If we look more closely (at play), we can discern patterns of amasing regularity and consistency." (Garvey 1977)

Children's play inevitably results in some kind of spontaneous activity, even when it is rooted in the demand to "go out and play." This "go out and play" demand is similar to the expectation that as we become adults we will have occupations and careers that will demand that we "go off to work." The literature of play includes long passages which attempt to differentiate work from play. Children's activities could be thought of as occupations and careers for which there are metaphors in the adult notion of "going off to work." I refer particularly to those adults and children who work with material things.

Consider for a moment Alison Uttley's account of her own childhood of play in a country environment of fields and trees found in the lovely little article entitled "Field Toys."

> "The fields were our toyshops and sweetshops, our market and our storehouses. We made our toys from things we found in the pastures. We ate sweet and sour food of the wild. We hunted from hedge to hedge as in a market, to find the best provisions, and we had our wild shops in corners of fields, or among the trees.
>
> "We picked green rushes from the little hollows by the springs. ....We stripped the green covering, taking off thin slips at a time to preserve the long white pith intact. The discovery of the pith, its texture, resilient and pliable, always gave me great pleasure. A bird's egg, a ribbon of pith from rushes, and an oxlip were treasures prized for their beauty.
>
> "From the pith we made pretty devices. We curled it into roses, little baskets, a purse with a handle, a doll's stool.
>
> "We picked the rye-grass, which we called 'Tinker, tailor grass,' and we counted the little ears to find out whom we should marry. Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man,

> poor man, beggar man, thief. We asked it, 'This year, next year, sometime, never.'
>
> "....cowslip bells were a storehouse of honey for the human little bees, and so were the horns of the honeysuckle. Like the bees themselves we sipped and tasted and hovered about the meadows, wild and happy and free." (Uttley 1943)

Careful analysis of literature wherein adults recall their own play of early childhood and careful analysis of young children's spontaneous activity invariably reveals six amazingly regular and consistent patterns of activity.... call them children's occupations if you will.

Children are Explorers, Constructors, Communicators, Athletes, Thespians and Ritualists.

> The child as explorer. Children are seen investigating the environment and the things in it, motivated by curiosity, a sense of wonder and a need to know. Activity is concerned with, but not limited to, transforming things, observing things, and trying and testing things.
>
> The child as constructor. Children organize or transform things into part, wholes and products. Activity is concerned with, but not limited to, representing things by painting, drawing, shaping and forming, building, inventing and producing things.
>
> The child as communicator. Children use language concerning explored objects, constructed objects, acted out images or motoric activity as the currency of social interaction. The child expresses knowledge about things and events. It often takes the form of speaking, writing, drawing about the materials and events inherent in activity. It can be a child's attempt to clarify some sort of disequilibrium by asking questions or reading.
>
> The child as athlete. Children use their muscles, body and motoric skills to enable explorative, constructive, communicative dramatic activity.
>
> The child as thespian. Children construct and dramatically represent reality as they understand it at that point in time. Imitation, role playing, puppetry and dramatic activity exemplify activity in this area.
>
> The child as a ritualist. Children take known information, especially patterns of behavior (both their own and others and the behavior of materials) and apply it to their own activity. This area has its roots in the development of social competence as well as logical competence.

These occupations are not neatly mutually exclusive. Few occupations are. Children explore at the same time as they construct; they are ritualists while they explore and communicate. Interpreting or coding children's observed behavior using these headings is frustrating. The people best able to use these headings to label activity are the children involved in activity. However, an analysis of Alison Uttley's recollection of her childhood play may give us insight into what appears to be spontaneous activity on her part. As you will note, it's tricky business to differentiate the occupations of play implied in the brief passages quoted earlier. Let me try in order to illustrate what I think is a message for today's early childhood educator.

Allison Uttley, as:

Explorer: . "We hunted from hedge to hedge as in a market,"

. "The discovery of the pith, its texture, resilient and pliable...."

. "We stripped the green covering, taking off thin slips at a time to preserve the long white pith intact."

Constructor: . "We made our toys from things we found in the pastures."

. "...we stripped the green covering, taking off thin slips at a time to preserve the long white pith intact."

. "From the pith we made pretty devices. We curled it into roses, little baskets, a purse with a handle, a doll's stool.

Communicator and Thespian. . "We picked the rye-grass, which we called 'tinker, tailor grass,' and we counted the little ears to find out whom we should marry. Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief. We asked it, 'This year, next year, sometime, never.'

Athlete: . "We made....We hunted....We picked....We stripped....We curled... we ....hovered about the meadows, wild and happy and free."

Ritualist: In time all the above-mentioned activities become rituals, patterns of behavior which create a typical response to a particular environment or object in it.

. "The fields were our toyshops and sweetshops, our market and our storehouses."

. "We picked green rushes from the little hollows by the springs."

- "A bird's egg, a ribbon of pith from rushes, and an oxlip were treasures prized for their beauty."
- "Like bees themselves we sipped and tasted and hovered about the meadows...."

The rituals have roots in the Explorer, Constructor, Communicator, Thespian and Athlete activity. These rituals, in turn, complement subsequent exploration construction and communication. So, rather than these universal activity behaviors being mutually exclusive, they are mutually interdependent. So, too, are the subsets of activity behavior that exemplify each spontaneous activity heading. If you think of rituals as patterns of behavior applied in response to a particular environment, event or object, it is then possible to see how the response supports social and moral development as well as cognitive development. Briefly, a child's awareness of the fact that there are patterns of behavior that can be applied to an object is not far from his being able to understand how patterns of behavior can also be applied to events of social or moral significance as well as to material problems which are cognitively challenging. There's an implied flexibility of thought here on the child's part which requires continued operations in Exploration, Construction and Communication to insure expansion of the strategies and concepts that children acquire more or less on their own as a consequence of their active spontaneous involvement with the environment and the things and people in it.

By virtue of the nature of spontaneous activity, children have learned quite a bit by the time we have them in Day Care, Nursery or Kindergarten programs. Forty-two years ago, John Dewey wrote about what a teacher's responsibility to children's innate ability to teach themselves should be:

> "The educator who receives the child at the end of this period (a period from infancy on up in which the child is constantly connecting with new objects and events which call out new powers while

> the exercise of these powers refines and enlarges the content of its experience) has to find ways for doing consciously and deliberately what 'nature' accomplishes in the earlier years.
> ....He (the educator) must constantly regard what is already won (learned) not as a fixed possession, but as an agency and instrumentality for opening new fields which make new demands upon existing powers of observation and of intelligent use of memory." (Dewey 1938)

I would like to deal with how the early childhood educator might carry out this responsibility. It's important to reflect for a moment on how today's prevailing philosophy of instruction and curriculum planning, inspired by certain economic realities, impinges on the admonishment implied in Dewey's words of 1938.

The "back to basics" movement inspired by larger classes, less money from taxpayers and a misbegotten idea that success on achievement tests is what teaching and instruction is all about is seductive enough to have begun to affect curriculum decision-making at the preschool and kindergarten levels. Emphasis has begun to shift, in Bruner's words from "knowing how to knowing that." (Bruner 1972) This conceptualizes the idea of some teachers as to how to get children ready for first grade. Schools and formal programs capitalize on children's early careers as communicators, seeing speech and writing as the "great medium through which human cooperation is brought about....the means by which the diverse activities of men are coordinated and correlated with each other for the attainment of common and reciprocal ends." (DeLaguna 1927, in Bruner 1972) Once this mode of communicating and transmitting knowledge has become established, "the conditions for the invention of school--a place where teaching occurs--are present." (Bruner 1972) Transmission of knowledge per se is not a concern to me so long as it does not come at the expense of the spontaneous activity behaviors children have used to acquire what they already know, and know quite well, by the time they first walk into our classrooms.

Basic School Curriculum activity is characterized by the necessity

of the child to bring learning under conscious control. When asked "What are you learning?", the child can say "How to add," or "Letter sounds." The learning of the content or skills of a given discipline is compressed into a relatively short period of time and is accompanied by some kind of formal instructional treatment usually effected by a teacher. The necessity for formalizing the instructional treatment of basic school skills is perpetuated by the belief on the part of many people that children cannot or will not learn these skills on their own or when they are "supposed to." The content and skills treated are reflective of priorities within the child's heritage and culture. There is a limit to the quality of the skills of basic school curriculum. The student either knows its content and has its skills or does not know its content and its skills. These skills and retention of the content are measureable.

Young children's spontaneous activity is characterized by learning occurring at a more subtle level. When asked "What are you learning?", the child is not always able to answer and may be more likely to say "But, this is what I am doing!" I am constantly amazed at how many children see their own learning as having occurred because of other people's efforts. Learning from spontaneous activity takes place over an extended period of time. Growth and development in Exploration, Construction, Communication, Improvisation, Athletics and Ritual, which can be thought of now as skills, can be encouraged by the teacher even though it's natural for the child. The materials the child uses become the vehicle for enabling the employment and development of these skills. The teacher interaction model then is very much an I→It→Thou (Hawkins 1969) kind of model which teachers have with children and the materials the children are attracted to. The level of skill exhibited by the child in spontaneous activity is measureable but it is a personal and idiosyncratic kind of measure, i.e., heavily dependent on the teacher's

reflection on the child's past accomplishment and on the nature of the child's active involvement in the social and material environment, and the inspiration for spontaneous activity provided by the home and school settings. The adult must have an enormous capacity for patient waiting and expectation. There is an infiniteness to the quality of the child's spontaneous activity...always a more sophisticated level of skill ability and conceptualization to which the child can aspire. It is towards this next higher level of spontaneous activity skill that the teacher encourages each child. This encouragement is not training. There's no need for that. Nor is it necessarily quick in achieving results or predictable in advance.

Alternative education of the open education type was exemplified as letting children do as they pleased in the learning environment. I'm not sure that it really was that way, nor am I sure that I am really advocating that education should be that way. Even if this is a prevailing attitude, the best teachers, being concerned and conscientious, set high behavioral standards and equally high creative challenges for their children. Suggestions for activity from the teacher complement the child's spontaneous activity and are advanced as alternative possibilities not as correct techniques. Maintaining the momentum of spontaneous activity is enabled by adding objects, experiences or challenges which are appropriate to the level of skill exhibited by the child at a given point in time so that they ultimately enable the process of "reconstruction of experience." (Dewey 1938)

"Back to basics" type curriculum activity programs are not devoid of experiences. The classroom can be very busy and active. The problem lies in the kind and quality of the experience. If you value and respect what children have learned as a result of their own energies, it may follow that you value the educational objective which suggests that people are truly educated when they

can carry on learning of any type for themselves. If the experiences in the classroom are such that the child does not spontaneously explore, construct and communicate prior to any activity focus you, as a teacher, could bring to the experience, then it lacks in the qualities which allow you to work yourself out of a job. In reality, you never quite succeed at this. Children and others won't let you, especially as you are perceived as the provider of materials to explore and construct with and as long as you and your classroom are the foil for children's communication and ritual.

There are some special things to remember about those materials which best support young children's spontaneous activity.

- Young children prefer experience with concrete materials rather than abstract experiences about concrete materials.
- The concrete material things in a given environment mediate the relationship between adult and child.
- Curriculum development by a teacher is enabled and inspired by his or her acute awareness, love for, fascination with and reverence for a raw material which is also interesting to children.
- Children's spontaneous activity with a raw material creates a thread which weaves or stitches each activity to another. This enables knowledge gained by the child in one activity with a raw material to be brought to bear on another activity with the same raw material.
- Increasingly diverse and novel experiences with a given material lay down respectively more conceptual threads concerning that material, like a fish net through which fewer and fewer chunks of information escape.
- Children's spontaneous activity with the raw material becomes both the vehicle for treating any school-prescribed skills for which the teacher is responsible, as well as the vehicle for assessing competencies and skills.
- The best kinds of materials are those which can be used extensionally by the child. Extensional as opposed to intensional use refers to the quality the material has for being used in many, many ways.
- There are lots of extensional materials, yet they all have these qualities in common. For a given material it:

    1. Exists in many forms, colors, weights, textures and states.
    2. Can be changed, shaped or transformed by the child's actions on it.

3. Can be easily found or is commonly available in most settings.
4. Is often something children have preconceptions about that reflect the material's intensional use.
5. Invites and allows observation and experimentation.
6. Has attributes that can be labelled and talked about.
7. Is usually provocative enough to capture children's attention without an adult being present.
8. Unfailingly provides for increasingly sophisticated levels of operation and interaction by the child.

To exemplify spontaneous activity at a classroom level, I recall an extended activity with a classroom of children ranging in age from three to six. The activity material is called "goop." It is a mixture of four parts flour, one part salt, one part sugar and about two cups of water beaten with an egg beater and colored with food coloring or tempera paint. Goop is dispensed by squeezing a soft plastic bottle with a nozzle-type cap, similar to the kind of dispensing bottle used to color hair. Once introduced in the classroom, its nature invited spontaneous activity regardless of the abilities each child brought to its properties. The goop activities observed at each spontaneous activity level are described briefly below. May I remind you again that observing and analyzing children's activity is not neatly enabled by the use of Explorer, Constructor, Communicator, Athlete, Thespian and Ritualist as activity headings. Each activity listed could have its motivation in one of the other spontaneous activity headings. The activities in capitals are activities suggested by the teacher as examples of how that teacher was focusing and inspiring activity specific to each spontaneous activity heading. These activities, however, were not suggested until the child had a considerable amount of time to become familiar with the properties and qualities of "goop."

Explorer
Trying each color one at a time
Applying goop to a variety of surfaces like egg cartons, paper plates, aluminum foil and cloth
Finger painting with goop, with no intent to depict something
Comparing goop from a container with a large nozzle hole with one with small hole
Sponge printing with no intent to create design
Trying to paint with goop using a brush
ADDING WATER TO GOOP TO SEE HOW IT WOULD ACT WHEN DRIBBLED
ADDING WATER TO HARDENED GOOP TO SEE IF IT WOULD SOFTEN

Constructor	Finger painting to create a sea-like picture Drawing faces with goop to make masks Applying goop to a surface, then impressing styrofoam and cork bits into the wet goop to make a collage Applying goop so as to follow the patterns suggested by the shape of the egg carton, then applying a second color parallel to the first line of color Applying goop to playdough and then cooking it Using goop to depict houses and people Sponge printing with goop to create a design TRACING THE OUTLINE OF AN AUTOMOBILE DEPICTED IN THE NEWSPAPER MAKING NEW BATCHES OF GOOP
Communicator	Descriptive words concerning the texture, feel and blending of goop Explaining to others how a particular result was accomplished MAKING A GOOP ACTIVITY BOOKLET FOR OTHERS
Athlete	Squeezing the bottle firmly, then softly, to regulate the flow Using a pipe cleaner to unclog the bottle nozzle Applying the goop exactly where and how it is wanted with control
Thespian	Pretending goop bottle is "sky writing." Pretending that goop bottle is a toothpaste tube being emptied completely
Ritualist	Repeating favorite goop activities Using goop the same way other material similar to goop is used, i.e., painting with it with brushes and fingers, and depicting a person Starting a new goop experience, choosing blue each time Partially filling each cup in the egg carton with one color before choosing a second color APPLYING GOOP TO A PLEXIGLASS SURFACE, THEN PRESSING PIECE OF OAKTAG ON TOP OF THE GOOP AND "LIFTING" THE DESIGN (The teacher suggested this activity having watched the child make "Rorschach" type designs by folding paper.)

Goop is not unique in its ability to incorporate activity at each of the six spontaneous activity areas. Goop, remember, is offered as an illustration as are the things these children did with goop. Same material, different childre usually yields....different activities. Same material, same children will yield, with the passage of time, different developmental responses to the material for each child.

Something akin to this kind of spontaneous activity is referred to as "developmental curriculum" by David Elkind. He defines the learning potential of this curriculum as "Essentially the sequence of abilities and concepts that children acquire more or less on their own....as a consequence of their active involvement with the environment." Referring to work by Inhelder and Piaget, Elkind further explains that "the concepts children acquire on their own are part of their basic adaptive equipment, which they need to get along in the world as living creatures." Elkind includes children's attainment of the concepts of mass, weight, volume, space, time, causality, geometry, speed and movement as concepts to exemplify what he calls "developmental curriculum." (Elkind 1976)

Elkind's exemplars of mass, weight, volume, etc., are heavily mathematical. This is not surprising. Elkind is a Piagetian scholar and Piaget's developmental theory is heavily mathematical in nature. There are, however, other abilities and concepts that children acquire more or less on their own...as a consequence of their active involvement with the environment...including especially attainment of concepts pertaining to the material things in that environment which are derived from children's spontaneous activity behaviors. These other strategies and concepts, I believe, are as developmental as Elkind's and they enable the learning and understanding of language, science, art and math concepts associated with the basic school curriculum of the early grades.

It remains to suggest what these other abilities are and at the same time suggest a possible relationship between school curriculum and spontaneous activity. In the following chart I've done just that, suggested how activity in one spontaneous activity area enables or supports understanding of and success with basic school curriculum areas. I hesitate to do more than suggest at this point. I wish not to have this paradigm answer the question of what enables the total learning of language, math, science and art skills in the early grades.

Language	Mathematics	Science	Art
	EXPLORER		
promoting speech promoting writing thought and image for speech and writing listening representing naming describing labelling	weight time speed movement form volume space shape outline part-whole relationships	causality tool use medium use planning experimenting observing	tool use medium use images of knowledge
	CONSTRUCTOR		
promoting speech promoting writing thought and image for speech and writing	form outline space time weight part-whole relationships speed movement volume	causality observing experimenting planning	tool use medium use images of knowledge production
	COMMUNICATOR		
representing naming describing labelling thought and image for speech and writing discussion listening promoting speech promoting writing	graphing charting	research	images of knowledge
	ATHLETE		
labelling thought and image for speech and writing	space weight speed movement time mass	analysis problem-solving	tool use images of knowledge
	THESPIAN		
promoting speech promoting writing thought and image for speech and writing listening representing naming labelling	time movement space	planning	images of knowledge production
	RITUALIST		
writing speaking listening communicating research	problem-solving	research analysis problem-solving	tool use medium use production images of knowledge

Learning is much more complicated than this paradigm implies. Further examples of the relationships suggested by this chart are, of course, necessary and hopefully will be possible in subsequent writings.

Spontaneous activity skills can be used to supplement and complement school curriculum skills and activities at all age levels. For the youngest children in a formal learning program, spontaneous activity may well be considered the conceptual framework for making curriculum decisions. The interface of spontaneous with school curriculum, just described, suggests that the former may actually enable the latter. As the child's spontaneous activity skills and conceptual understandings develop and refine in experience, school curriculum activities can be woven into the fabric of children's daily activity. School curriculum activity should be included only as it is enabled by the level of the child's skill and conceptual understandings expressed and experienced in each of the spontaneous activity areas. At no point should school curriculum activity exclude opportunity for spontaneous activity. Increasing levels of sophistication possible in each area and the potential of these activity areas for enabling the learning of the school curriculum suggests that spontaneous activity is basic curriculum. It is basic because it operates on behaviors, skills and activity abilities that the child spontaneously brings to school from having been actively involved in the materialed world around him.

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